

Barbecue and Sex

If you do it right, you don't need sauce

By Dan Gill, Ethno-Gastronomist

"What is it about the subject of barbecue that causes such dramatic responses in otherwise respectable citizens? Why don't brownies, omelets or house dressing variations generate an equal volume of discussion?"

.....barbecue, in all its various forms throughout the world, has long been the province of the male of the species. Women--intelligent creatures that they are--generally prefer to remain indoors away from the heat, the smoke and the heavy lifting.

So, here's my hypothesis: remove the beer and testosterone from the act of barbecuing and all you're left with is roasted meat and sauce."

Sarah Labensky, co-author of "On Cooking: A Textbook of Culinary Fundamentals" (Prentice Hall, 3rd ed. 2002)

Occasionally, I lurk on an e-mail forum concerned with the historical, sociological and cultural aspects of our food heritage. Most of the participants are dignified and learned scholars but occasionally, some of us (male) barbarians on the fringe digress into the controversial realms of barbecue - with predictable results. The above quote followed a somewhat intemperate post from yours truly, in which I attempted to re-direct the thinking of an established author on the subject.

It is with great trepidation that I address gender roles in cooking. There obviously is tremendous variation in behavior within sexes and across cultures. Even in the Caribbean, where our barbecue traditions started, gender roles were not static; women could opt to function in society as men and vice versa. Women who chose a male role were included in the male rituals and could assume leadership positions. There are many excellent female barbecueists, just as there are many men who are artists in the kitchen, but outdoor cooking and barbecue are generally male dominated. In the vast continuum of barbecue methodology, which ranges from boiling, foiling and saucing to honest, all-day slow cooking over live coals, men claim a territory that they consider "real barbecue". If challenged, they will defend it vigorously; discussions can become

quite heated and personal at times.

Throughout history and across cultures, women have been the "keepers of the hearth". The hearth, now kitchen, is the heart of the home where bread is baked and food is boiled, braised, roasted and fried. These (mostly) indoor activities are all relatively predictable. Boiling is boiling is boiling. Women generally don't want to fiddle around with things a lot. They want to do what they have to do to get the job done. There is, of course, creativity, talent and art in conventional cooking but it mostly involves preparation rather than the cooking process. Women like maps; they need to know exactly where they are going and how to get there. Grandma's cottage potatoes and tuna casserole vary little from what she cooked as a newlywed. She got the recipe from her mother and still has it tucked away somewhere - to pass on. Men, however, will embark on a kitchen adventure with minimal guidance and only a vague destination in mind. Armed with Texas Pete and a bottle of Worcestershire sauce, a man will cast about the kitchen to find ingredients that may spark up a dish: Women already know how it is supposed to be done! Therefore many of the greatest chefs are men and many of the advances in culinary arts are attributable to men.

Barbecue is not predictable; you cannot just light a fire, stick the meat on and go cut the grass. Men must resist this temptation. Barbecue must constantly be monitored; preferably from a hammock in the shade with a beer and a good cigar and several other men to bond with (these traditions are the real contribution of the Taino Indians). Variables are infinite: wind, temperature, humidity, type and quality of meat, type and quality of wood and many other factors affect the process and outcome. In other words, barbecue requires a lot of "fiddling" and maps are of limited value.

Fiddling is one of the things men do best. They also enjoy the primal challenge of dealing with the basic elements: fire, water, firewater, meat, and chilies. Men enjoy the challenges so much that many even disdain thermometers preferring to monitor heat ranges by how long they can stand to hold their hand on the barbecue lid.

The real reason for these gender differences in cooking goes back to the very basis of our existence. The three primal imperatives are food, shelter and survival of the species (procreation); everything else is optional. Barbecue is associated with the hunt, which is equated with the universal male dominion of providing meat for the family. There are still hunter-gatherer tribes in Central and South America who hunt, prepare and barbecue meat just as it was done in the Americas in 1492 and thousands of years before. A hunt may last several days or weeks. Meat rots fast in the jungle. It is therefore cut into strips and smoked on a "barbacoa" (raised platform of sticks) so that it will last until the hunters return to the village.

Most of the meat that we "hunt" now comes wrapped in plastic but if you think the hunting instinct has been lost, just follow a man around the supermarket; or visit us at "Something Different" to sample our fine Neanderthal cuisine.

*Something Different Country Store
& Deli*

www.pine3.info

sdcsdeli@yahoo.com

© Dan Gill 4-05-05